

Ethical and Sustainability Concerns of Fast Fashion: A Review

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Abstract: Fast fashion is a concept related to low cost clothing that is very similar to luxury fashion trends. It helps to satisfy the inherent desire in consumers for luxury garments. However, this trend has some alarming impact on sustainability. This industry is a major contributor to global warming due to high carbon footprint and usage of non renewable sources of energy. This trend also raises ethical concerns related to unfair labour practices and increasing consumerism.

The paper tries to critically evaluate the issues underlying fast fashion industry from business ethics and sustainability perspectives. It also attempts to provide suitable recommendations in order to deal with the identified issues from the point of view of governments, producers and consumers.

Keywords: Business ethics, fast fashion, sustainability, renewable energy, luxury brands

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, fashion came from the catwalks and was dominated by luxury specialists like Gucci and Louis Vuitton. The emergence of fast fashion retailers such as Inditex's Zara and Hennes & Mauritz AB (H & M) has made it accessible to a wider audience at lower prices.

Today, all brands, from internal labels such as Myntra and Amazon to the largest Indian fashion retailers such as FBB and VMart, even local labels, sell fashion at prices lower than fast fashion brands.

According to MarketLine, a business information company global apparel sales have been growing at the rate of 4.78% a year since 2011, valued at \$1.4 trillion USD in 2017, the market shows a potential increase of 5.91% for the next two years. As per the report sales should reach a staggering \$1.65 trillion USD in 2020 which is a 60% increase from 2011. The reason for this growth spurt is due to the rising GDP levels which enable people to spend more money on items of luxury rather than necessity.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary (2018) defines fast fashion as “an approach to the design, creation, and marketing of clothing fashions that emphasizes making fashion trends quickly and cheaply available to consumers”.

Essentially, it is low-cost apparel based on current, high cost luxury fashion trends, with the intention of affordability, increased disposability and further consumption (Fletcher, 2008). Previously, the standard turnaround time from presentation at a catwalk to availability for consumers to purchased was approximate six months (Ghemawat & Nueno 2006). With the emergence of FF, this has been significantly reduced to a matter of weeks as companies thrive on fast cycles: rapid prototyping in batches with large variety, more efficient production, transportation, delivery, and merchandising (Skov,

2002; Anon, 2016).

Fashion today is the second largest polluter in the world after the oil and gas industry. With over 80 billion garments produced each year and a 400% increase in the amount of clothes purchased from 20 years ago. The questions must be asked, what is the impact of this type of this industry on the climate emergency? And, what are the ethical considerations in this industry?

The paper tries to critically evaluate the issues underlying fast fashion industry from business ethics and sustainability perspectives. It also attempts to provide suitable recommendations in order to deal with the identified issues.

Environmental Issues

Cotton, polyester and nylon are the major inputs for this industry. Polyester overtook cotton as the most used fabric in the textile industry in the early onset of the 21st Century. It is a petroleum by-product. The production of polyester results in the emissions of heavy metals, greenhouse gases and nitrous oxide. Most polyesters use antimony as catalysts, which are carcinogenic in nature. Nylon, like polyester is also a petroleum by-product, releasing tonnes of toxic gases in its making. Both the materials needless to say are non-biodegradable.

Cotton is a thirsty crop whose production has great repercussions on land as well as water. 2.5% of the world's arable land is dedicated to grow cotton. Cotton consumes approximately 198 trillion litres of water annually and 11% of the pesticides used globally.

One of the major concerns for fast fashion industry is related to use of energy and green house emissions. The industry is highly resource intensive and uses large amount of water and fossil fuels in the washing and dyeing processes. Apparel represents 6.7% of global climate impacts (Quantis, 2018). Future implication for the planet if this figure grows or is not reduced is catastrophic (Attenborough 2018). In 2015, polyester released more than 706 billion kgs of CO₂ emissions globally. To put it in smaller terms a single polyester T-shirt produces 5.5kgs of CO₂.

Chemicals and their related toxicity brings another issue which is related to the dyeing of clothes. This toxic water goes to the natural water supplies. This has hazardous impact on human and animal health. Conventional dyes present extreme health to workers and consumers including skin rashes, nausea, difficulty breathing, irregular heartbeat, seizures and behavioural difficulties for some children (Europa, 2006). Washing of polyester and nylon clothes release half a million metric tons of microfibers annually. These tiny particles of fibres add to the plastic levels in our oceans and pose a threat to marine life.

The waste produced goes to the landfills and fabrics like polyester take millions of years to decompose. Impact can also come from gas and leachate formation include fires and explosions, vegetation damage, unpleasant odours, landfill settlement, groundwater pollution, air pollution and eventual global warming (Science Direct, 2018).

Another important dimension is the emission of green house gases in the transportation process. Fast fashion asks for fast turnaround leading to frequent refilling of stores with latest trends as frequently as a fortnight. With production facilities located across the globe, the fast fashion companies are spending a huge amount on the air transport of garments leading to high carbon footprint of this industry.

Table 1: Estimates of Negative Factors of Garment Production (Source: Ellen Macarthur Foundation)

Negative Factors of Garment Production	2015	2050
Resource Consumption	98 million Tonnes crude Oil	300 Million Tonnes Crude Oil
Textiles Industry's Share Of Carbon Budget	2 % of total Carbon Dioxide Production	26% of Total Carbon Dioxide Production
Microfibers In The Ocean	X million Tonnes	X + 22 million Tonnes

Business ethics related issues

The fashion industry is labour-intensive and hosts one third of its manufacturing in Asia.

Some of the implications are poor working conditions for factory workers in developing countries (including below poverty line wages and long hours) and health and safety risks, including factories located in vulnerable buildings and exposure to harmful chemicals (dyes)(Morgan, 2015).

Another important concern is the use of child labour in the manufacturing process. According to ILO, 170 million children are engaged in child labour and a major proportion of it is employed with the fashion industry.

According to the campaign *Labour Behind The Label*, workers in India reported verbal harassment, gender discrimination, and unspecified wage deductions. As if all this is not enough, the danger of death lurks around. The **collapse** of the Rana Plaza factory in Bangladesh was a shocking wake up call for the fashion industry. That incident killed at least 1,132 people and injured more than 2,500 and is considered to be one of the worst industrial disasters in history, it unearthed the working conditions of garment workers in Bangladesh and other third world countries.

The fast fashion brands are starting their production facilities in Africa. Labour outsourcing to Africa has potential ecosystem impacts with inherent poor infrastructure potential increasing waste and human toxicity (Quantis, 2018). Removing labour from Asia also has concerns re employment loss.

Exclusivity of designs leads to unethical practices from the side of brands also. Luxury fashion brand Burberry incinerated stock worth 38 million USD last year leading to anguish of investors and consumers. This is a common yet ethically alarming practice in luxury brand to burn unsold garments and even fabric rolls. The reason that comes is that becoming too widely available at a cheaper price leads to decline in full price sales. Also, there is fear of designs being stolen and black marketing.

Another important issue is the underlying consumerism. The 'fast fashion' business model encourages the notion of disposability (Fletcher, 2008; Joy et al. 2012) while the combination of disposability, low prices and limited product runs in turn encourages impulse buying and leads to systemic overconsumption (Presley & Meade, 2018) and the creation of what Tokatli (2008) calls "mass exclusivity".

The implications of this overconsumption on a sector that has been noted as one of the most environmentally damaging industries (Fletcher, 2013) is far reaching as it adds a multiplying effect to each of the unsustainable practices noted earlier, leading to an unnecessary increase in waste, a systematic decrease in resources and a reduction in the Earth's ability to regenerate (Bernardes et al. 2017).

Recommendations

The problems of fast fashion are multifold and deep rooted. However attempts are being made to bring down the harmful impact. However efforts are needed from all stakeholders like governments, producers, consumers and the society.

The first facet for the recommendations is the material itself. Use of organic cotton should be encouraged which consumes less or no pesticides. The concept of circular economy should be used by producers which encourages recycling and reuse of material and contributes to zero loss. Governments should make laws favoring such businesses and provide tax and other incentives to encourage such practices.

Next recommendation is usage of eco friendly dyes. Cost of product to consumers may increase however demands from millennials may be higher to sustain the cost as these dyes are not contributing to health concerns and global warming and the devastating of our planet.

Another important facet is the use of fossil fuels. A shift is needed from fossil fuels to solar energy over coal or natural gas to derive heat. Effective way to achieve 2030 UN SDGs is to impose industry-wide science-based targets, focused on renewable energy and energy efficiency across supply chains (Quantis, 2018).

Globalization of the fashion industry weakens the control of governments. Governments are exposed to different global corporations with differing ethical values towards bribery, corruption and taxation (Crane and Matten, 2010). Government incentive programmes to benefit early adopters of solar technology are in existence locally and globally. Further economic encouragement via technical research and development, industrialized support and government model projects should all be expanded (ScienceDirect, 2018).

From the peoples' perspectives a very important dimension is extension of life of garments and smart consumption. Life of garments can be improved by using good quality raw material and effective designing. Handlooms should be encouraged as they mostly use natural fibers and provide good employment opportunities. They also provide time tested designs thus consumer is assured of the fabric not going out of fashion soon. Garments should be suitable for use in multiple ways with different styling options. Smart consumption examples include leasing clothes and take-back schemes. Leasing of clothes is gaining popularity in India though some social media handles giving a good business option which leads to sustainability.

Strengthening of labour laws and increased vigilance on corruption can bring down the instances of inhuman labour practices and eliminate child labour.

Above all, more awareness in the population regarding the harmful effects of fast fashion can lead to less consumerism and better utilization of natural resources. Consumers will start appreciating firms which are ethical by buying their garments and punishing the firms involved in unsustainable and unethical business practices by avoiding their products.

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